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South Africa's Elections 2014: And the Winner is?

Henning Melber

On 7 May 2014, less than half a year after the death of Nelson Mandela, South Africans democratically elected for the fourth time since 1994 the country's national parliament and the various provincial governments. In a generally relaxed climate, all seemed well in the rainbow nation. Most parties welcomed the announced results. But do they and the South African people now have cause for optimism?

Analysis

- This contribution presents a summary report and analysis of the final stages of the lead up to the elections, the vote count, and the results, partly based on personal observations during 4–10 May 2014. It comments on the political trends now likely to emerge, as indicated by both the election results and the reactions of the parties to them. Furthermore, it offers a mapping of the current political landscape in the country, as reproduced in the national and provincial parliaments – and also as it exists outside of these institutions of governance.
- Despite some institutional flaws that favored the ANC as the dominant party, the election campaigning was relatively open and fair – though, as always, the bigger parties had advantages thanks to the greater financial means at their disposal.
- The voting and counting processes happened with only a few minor disturbances therein, and even at local “hotspots” hardly any disruptions occurred that could have cast doubts on the legitimacy of the electoral procedures.
- The final results officially announced were finally accepted by all parties and the wider public, which testifies to the democratic nature and general political stability of South Africa's current governance system.
- The general analyses by observers tended to be more critical as regards the success of the bigger parties than the official party declarations themselves suggested, while it seems that the future of the ANC and of South Africa's political landscape is being affected by growing voter apathy (mainly among the younger generation).

Keywords: South Africa, parliamentary elections, provincial elections, political parties, ANC, Democratic Alliance, Economic Freedom Fighters

The Pre-Election Atmosphere

Sunday (4 May 2014) witnessed the final rallies of the political parties campaigning. The general mood was relaxed, despite vocal complaints from the aging Zulu leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi that the country's elections were never free and fair. Since his Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) faced a rather bleak future, his ramblings came as no surprise. Politically motivated violence against rival party supporters remained largely absent throughout the countrywide campaigns. The Democratic Alliance (DA) complained that supporters of the African National Congress (ANC) had stoned three of their buses carrying members to final rallies in Johannesburg's former townships of Soweto and Alexandra.

The ANC dismissed these allegations as anti-ANC propaganda. Nearby the alleged incidents, the ruling party held its final rally in the Johannesburg FNB stadium, the arena where the public commemoration ceremony celebrated the life of Nelson Mandela in December 2013. Having then been jeered and booed at by the crowd, precautionary measures were taken to protect the party president and head of state Jacob Zuma from a similar embarrassment occurring this time around. All those in the fully occupied 95,000-seater venue were thus carefully recruited and closely scrutinized by party cadres, so as to prevent another humiliating experience from unfolding.

Frustration among the poor and marginalized over a lack of delivery of basic services had been continually growing during Zuma's first term in office. On 2 May the Durban-based shack dweller movement Abahlali baseMjondolo had, in a surprise announcement, asked his almost 30,000 members to cast a "tactical vote" for the DA to teach the ANC a lesson. Another much discussed initiative was the "Vote No" campaign launched by former Security Minister Ronnie Kasrils. It mobilized people around either voting for one of the small parties or spoiling the ballot paper outright to remind the ANC of its original values and principles, so as to not risk it losing further popular support.

Ahead of Election Day, President Zuma spoke for the first time about the controversial "Nkandlagate" episode. This scandal had broken when it was disclosed that large amounts of public funds were being pumped into a private retirement residence for Zuma and his family, something wide-

ly considered to be an abuse of government authority and a misuse of taxpayers' money. Zuma dismissed allegations that he was personally involved in these dubious transactions. He was confident that this was only an issue for the media and the opposition, but would not bother the majority of people supportive of the ANC (City Press 2014). As he maintained: "They do not think it is an issue that will affect how they vote. This is an issue raised by bright people [those who think they know better]" (Quoted in Letsoalo 2014).

Interest focused increasingly on the issue of how the growing segments of the electorate who found themselves disappointed by government policy might vote – or, indeed, not. The Vote No campaign as well as the decision to utilize tactical voting sparked off a discussion about (non-)voting as a political articulation. "Make a Choice" urged the daily newspaper *The Star* in a front-page editorial on 6 May. An article in the *City Press* predicted that 46 percent voter turnout might be the lowest since democratic elections first took place. Reportedly, "the largest group of unregistered voters are aged between 18 and 24 and constitute 38 percent of the total" (Saba 2014).

While the ANC and the DA focused on their respective employment creation policies as a major campaign theme, the Unemployed People's Movement (UPM) issued a statement on 5 May endorsing the Vote No campaign: "We are calling on our members to refuse to vote for the ANC and vote for any of the small parties, but not the DA, or to spoil their votes if they cannot bring themselves to support any of the small parties." While it distanced itself from the decision of the shack dwellers' movement to make a tactical vote for the DA, the UPM defended its right to make such a controversial shift of allegiance and stressed the need for "a serious and respectful conversation among all left forces about strategy and tactics for the long struggle ahead" (UPM 2014).

"The battle for the future commences" commented Leonard Gentle (2014) in his pre-election analysis, regarding the voting tendencies now emerging. Gentle, the director of the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), concluded his prognosis by stating that: "Just 20 years after the vast majority of South Africans won the franchise, the public broadcaster, the print media, and the Independent Electoral Commission are now reduced to begging people to vote. It's not Kasrils and his cohorts who are

spoiling the vote, it's the ANC and all the parties of the elite."

The Electoral Process and Vote Count

The Tshwane area (Pretoria and surroundings) was during Election Day as calm as on any other public holiday. When driving through some residential areas in Pretoria, one could spot the occasional orderly lining up of voters. Waterkloof, an upmarket residential area, had a few, mainly white, people visiting the polling station and it only took them a few minutes to exercise their democratic right. Queues in less posh Arcadia were longer, more mixed, and living proof of the rainbow nation's existence.

At both polling stations political parties were, beyond their election observers, barely visible and the atmosphere rather subdued. The ANC had an outpost in Arcadia, which kept track of registered members in the voting district. If they had not yet shown up by the afternoon, they were phoned as a reminder not to forget to pass by; the pages with names and cell phone numbers (proudly disclosed, with no concern for protecting the identity of those listed) were a sign that South African party activists are indeed now trying to use advanced communication technologies, though the (hand-written) lists were obviously not computerized.

Very different was the atmosphere in Mamelodi, a township on the outskirts of the capital. Outside of the polling station the ANC and the EFF had set their tables peacefully next to each other. They welcomed the distinct looking group of visiting observers – some twenty young female students from the United States and their local (elderly male) white companions – and enjoyed their exchanges with them. The queue of (exclusively black) voters was long in the morning but much shorter in the afternoon, with people calmly waiting to be allowed into the polling station.

Only a few incidents were reported during the day and night. Considering the previously violent trajectory of a country marred by racial – and occasionally ethnic – divisions until twenty years ago, with politically motivated killings still being a regular occurrence today, this was a show of a true rainbow nation spirit – although, behind the peaceful façade, there might very well have been another less prominently reported reality.

Polling stations closed at 9pm. From midnight the first results began trickling in, and updates were reported live by the national television broadcasters from the early hours of the morning. "I would like to do a little bit better than that, but I take it," commented DA leader Helen Zille in the first live televised reaction to the 23 percent of the vote the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) projected the DA to win on the national level. Gwede Mantashe, ANC Secretary General, seemed not impressed that he was approached only after Helen Zille by the clearly pro-government reporting of the national South African Broadcasting Company (SABC). He conceded that he was slightly worried about the first results coming in from Gauteng and admitted that "we should do better."

With 95 percent of the votes having been counted by the Friday morning (9 May), the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) expected the final results to become apparent during the afternoon of the same day. This was rather wishful thinking. Irritation had already been caused earlier in the day by the discovery of dumped ballot papers from a polling station in Pretoria and by a similar incident in Alexandra. However, in both cases the votes had reportedly previously been counted and the final results authorized by the party observers. A big disaster – which would have been the case with the necessity of a recount – was thereby averted. But these revelations remained a much-discussed embarrassment for the IEC, whose performance was far from being flawless.

During Friday night the almost complete standstill of the vote count in Gauteng would become a concern not only for the DA hoping to replace the provincial government of the ANC; it provoked even more the frustration of the EFF, which had high expectations for its own performance in the capitalist center of the mining industry. "At exactly 17:59 the ANC was at 50.21 percent of the Gauteng vote, and immediately after that the Gauteng results started to slow down and almost came to an absolute halt because the ANC was heading towards below 50 percent of the Gauteng vote," stated Mbuyiseni Ndlozi, as spokesperson for the EFF, on behalf of the party (EFF 2014). As of 2:30 am on Friday morning many voting districts in the most contested parts of Johannesburg and Pretoria were as yet still not announcing results. From the early hours of the Friday, however, the Gauteng vote count picked up

momentum again and votes for the ANC moved above the 50 percent threshold, with the party cruising into a more comfortable zone of 52 percent plus of the vote.

When voting discrepancies were reported from some polling stations in Gauteng and the Western Cape between the IEC vote count being announced and the audited count made by election observers the legitimacy of the exercise was for a few moments seemingly at risk (Pillay 2014a). Come Saturday morning the EFF seemed to suggest that it would not accept the results but launch an official objection instead. Then, however, during the early afternoon EFF party leader Julius Malema declared in a statement that: "Whatever shenanigans they did we accept, it is part of the school fees you pay. There are no perfect elections. We do not want a civil war, we do not want this country in ashes. We love this country of Nelson Mandela" (Pillay 2014b). Much to the relief not only of the IEC this cleared the way for proceedings to continue, and so by early Saturday evening IEC chairperson Pansy Tlakula could announce the official election results.¹

The Election Results

The National Parliament

There were no big surprises when it came to the distribution of the 400 national assembly seats among 13 out of the 29 parties competing. The forecasts based on the first election poll conducted by the CSIR were not that far wide of the mark, with only the EFF doing better than had been suggested. The new constellation allowed for policy-making through negotiation and promised some interesting parliamentary debates: the ANC was confirmed once again as the dominant party (with minor losses), with the support of around 11.5 million out of 18 million voters (62.15 percent/249 seats); the DA, as the official opposition with the backing of some 4.1 million voters (22.23 percent/89 seats), became stronger; and, the EFF emerged as a new third force supported by 1.2 million voters (6.35 percent/25 seats).

Hitherto the new kids on the block – such as the Congress of the People (COPE) – had not last-

ed for long before disappearing again into irrelevance. In this election the COPE's support base largely switched back to the ANC. Mamphela Ramphele's newly created AGANG did not even have to worry about this: with just two seats in parliament, her party turned out to be a stillborn child. Her premature political flirtations with the DA, first agreeing to be its presidential candidate (without the endorsement of her party for that) and then backtracking on this the next day, in the end damaged her reputation irreversibly. "I offered her the world and she ended up in a shack in Pofadder [a remote place in the Northern Cape]," commented Helen Zille in a television interview during vote counting. In the end, Ramphele even opted out of accepting a mandate in parliament – thereby ending her political career before it had really started. In contrast, Bantu Holomisa expressed relief and delight that his United Democratic Movement (UDM) managed to create a minor surprise by crawling back to take 1 percent of the vote. The worse results that the movement received five years previously had suggested that they should be written off and might as well close shop.

The Provincial Governments

The DA failed to replace the ANC as the provincial government in Gauteng, but remained upbeat after increasing its votes by almost half to over 30 percent and thus bringing the ANC closer to the 50 percent threshold. That the DA became the official opposition in KwaZulu Natal, ahead of the IFP, with 2 percent of the vote might be another consolation. The IFP suffered losses with the breaking away from it of the National Freedom Party (NFP), which ended up taking fourth place in the province. Equally comforting for the DA might be the fact that its Western Cape stronghold was further cemented, with more than 59 percent of the vote taken there. But the EFF replaced the DA as the official opposition in the new EFF stronghold provinces of Limpopo and North West, and it also achieved a two-digit result in Gauteng.

The ANC might be disappointed by results in the Western Cape, with it taking just over one-third of the vote there. While the party maintained its dominance elsewhere, the Gauteng vote – just like some other results were – represented anything but a stellar performance. This election was not simply another exercise in rubber stamping the status quo. The number of votes secured by the

¹ Full details of national and provincial voting figures are accessible on the IEC webpage at: <www.elections.org.za/resultsNPE2014/>.

DA and the EFF are significant signals that there is now shifting ground. The EFF will in future seek to anchor its base further among frustrated workers and the unemployed. While the ANC sounds confident that it has survived a range of scandals and in-fights unscathed, it should have no reason for complacency. Dissenting voices from among the grassroots were louder and more radical than ever before in this election.

The Political Perspectives

Attention here will focus on the possible emergence of a new left party seeking inroads into parts of the tripartite alliance between the ANC, South African Communist Party (SACP), and in particular the frustrated segments of the internally divided Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), more than on the dynamics in the new national parliament and provincial governments. To some extent, the positioning of the EFF will be a contributing factor when it comes to determining what the scope of such a potential realignment of the country's Left will be (for further possible scenarios, see de Wet 2014).

Despite the relief over the remarkably smooth running of the elections, circumstances enabling South Africa to maintain its international reputation, social divisions and gross inequalities have not gone away. Nor has the large-scale self-enrichment of a new (and old) elite suddenly evaporated and disappeared. These problems are no closer to being resolved, and the antagonisms of a blatantly class-based society with extreme income discrepancies – spiced with a grain of (at times not so) subtle racism as a residual factor for policy-makers – have not been automatically reduced. These elections and the results thereof have not really produced any new battle lines, which would in any case distract attention from the real challenges at hand. Put differently: there will not now be any (new) old excuses for the (old) new government.

Like everywhere else the big parties had a comparative advantage from the word go, while the government benefitted from its influence over the state media – in particular the SABC, which was blatantly partisan in its election coverage. Smaller parties faced, also as elsewhere, an uphill battle in terms of having more limited funds, staff, and volunteers for campaigning. As such, the taking off of the EFF is even more impressive, despite its activists having originally expressed confidence that it would achieve even better results than it ultimate-

ly actually did. But beyond an unequal playing field and the reproduction of vested interests remains the sense that South African voters showed an impressive degree of maturity in combination with an easy going approach, turning the electoral act in certain places into a form of leisure pursuit. One is therefore tempted to conclude that in the final reckoning the winner was not any of the parties but, if anyone at all, rather the electorate – or maybe those who ultimately decided not to vote for any of the parties, thereby achieving an intensive debate over politics and political behaviour in the country.

After all, there is another hidden story here, as documented by a 16 percent drop in South African voter turnout over the last twenty years. In percentage points, the participation of registered voters in the country since 1999 has amounted to: 89.3 (1999), 76.7 (2004), 77.3 (2009), and 73.5 (2014) (see Mataboge and Letsoalo 2014). Out of 18.65 million registered voters, one-quarter did not go to the polls and a quarter of a million people spoilt their ballot papers. This has been elaborated in more detail by a social movement activist as follows:

1994: Of the 23,063,910 eligible voters, 85.53 percent (19,726,610) voted while the remaining 14.47 percent (3,337,300) stayed away. The ANC received support from 53.01 percent (12,237,655) of the eligible voting population.

1999: Of the 25,411,573 eligible voters, 62.87 percent (15,977,142) voted while the remaining 37.13 percent (9,434,431) stayed away. The ANC received support from 41.72 percent (10,601,330) of the eligible voting population.

2004: Of the 27,994,712 eligible voters, 55.77 percent (15,612,671) voted while the remaining 44.3 percent (12,382,041) stayed away. The ANC received support from 38.87 percent (10,880,917) of the eligible voting population.

2009: Of the 30,224,145 eligible voters, 59.29 percent (17,919,966) voted while the remaining 40.71 percent (12,304,179) stayed away. The ANC received support from 38.55 percent (11,650,748) of the eligible voting population.

2014: Of the 31,434,035 eligible voters, 59.34 percent (18,654,457) voted while the remaining 40.66 percent (12,779,578) stayed away. The ANC received support from 36.39 percent (11,436,921) of the eligible voting population (McKinley 2014).

Eight of the 13 parties in the new national assembly won seats with less votes than the number of those that were spoilt. These were: the Freedom Front Plus (FF+) and the UDM, with four seats each; the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), the COPE, and the African Independent Congress (AIC), with three seats each; AGANG with two seats; and, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and the African People's Convention (APC), with one seat apiece. The Vote No campaigners considered their mission to have been accomplished, given that the more than 250,000 votes spoilt would have placed them as the sixth-biggest party in the national assembly. Louise Colvin, as spokesperson for the initiative, commented that: "Given our history and the deep-seated loyalty South Africans have for the proud liberation movement, we believe these elections mark a turning point whereby voters are prepared to shift from voting for a party to voting to strengthen the opposition" (Quoted in the *Mail & Guardian* 2014).

It seems, however, as if despite these optimistic tones the intended sending of a strong warning to the ANC failed to achieve its goal in the eyes of the wider public. After all, if it was not for the EFF then South African politics would still largely be a case of business as usual in the wake of these elections. Minor shifts in the power balance on the level of provincial authorities promise a possible battleground for future control in some municipalities during the next round of local elections (particularly in parts of the Eastern Cape). More interesting will be whether – and, if so, to what extent – the EFF can effectively consolidate its status in the near future. Of secondary interest will be whether the fourth-placed IFP, which already had to share its votes with the NFP as a breakaway party from it, will survive another electoral period. Retaining ten seats, six went to the NFP – with it thus being the fifth-strongest party represented in the national assembly.

President Zuma welcomed the announcement of the official results as "reaffirmation that South Africa indeed has a good story to tell" (Mataboge 2014). But Dale McKinley set the record straight when he concluded that:

The official version of these latest national elections (in many cases, mirrored by the media) is one in which there is a "high voter turnout" and where the ANC victory is presented as indicative of support from the "majority of vot-

ers." And so it is that the almost 13 million who decided not to participate in the 2014 elections (whether registered or not) are effectively air-brushed from the picture, while the 11.5 million who voted for the ANC become "the people." Stalin would be smiling approvingly. [...] In his post-election speech President Zuma stated that the ANC's electoral victory represents an "overwhelming mandate from our people ... and reaffirms that the ANC remains the only true hope for the majority of our people." Clearly, he and his organization have not read the whole story (McKinley 2014).

The two stories one can divulge from these election results – in other words, the one of victory for the ANC that contrasts with the one of a gradual erosion of legitimacy through a stronger opposition and/or as a result of many refusing to participate in the act of voting – illustrate the fundamental divide that exists in South African society. It might have seemed for the external observers of the voting and its aftermath as if electing their national and provincial governments was not a big deal for South Africans. The most spectacular discovery might in retrospect have been that – with the exception of the temporary Gauteng hiccup – there was actually not really anything spectacular happening at all. A few isolated minor incidents reported during Election Day suggested irregularities or interferences caused by acts of violent or insults were considered barely worth mentioning by the media, due to their perceived lack of seriousness. This might, however, actually represent a careless act of negligence and oversight regarding what is really going on at the grassroots level. Views from the ground tend to give less cause for celebration. As observed by Richard Poplak, who was in Alexandra the night ballot boxes temporarily went missing, "the fact that we are all fellow citizens united by democratic expression does not seem to mean much. For the men standing by the fire, the only ballots that speak are those that were not counted" (Poplak 2014).

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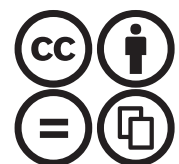
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